

# Revolutionary Songs from Myanmar: Reconsidering Scholarly Perspectives on Protest Music

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## Abstract

Since the February 1, 2021 military coup in Myanmar, Burmese musicians have been creating and circulating anti-coup songs, which are usually called “revolutionary songs.” This article describes a representative sample of these songs, explaining how the lyrics reference important tropes in Burmese life and history. Further, the article argues that these revolutionary songs, while they can be understood as protest music, do not fit precisely into categories previously delineated for protest songs. Nor do these songs provide a neat answer to the question that scholars so often pose of protest music, to wit: do these songs work to persuade listeners to take an anti-authoritarian position? Depending on ethnographic findings derived from interviews with musicians, disseminators and listeners, I argue that Burmese revolutionary songs are intended to support those already involved in resisting the military regime. The songs’ reception is complicated, suggesting that scholars must be cautious about making liberatory claims for protest music, even in cases such as this, where the lyrics of the songs are unambiguous and well-understood by listeners.

The elected government of the Southeast Asian nation of Myanmar, also known as Burma, was overthrown by a military coup on February 1, 2021. In the weeks and months following the coup, musicians from both inside and outside the country—including professionals and amateurs—created a body of new songs. The words of these songs condemn the coup and advocate for a return to democracy. Recordings of the songs circulate widely on social media. Some posters created compilation (medley) recordings, combining these new songs with TikTok videos, footage of street protests, and older songs that elucidate the same theme. The result is a corpus of more than three dozen recordings that I categorize as “revolutionary songs,” following their creators’ most frequent English-language designation. Revolutionary songs span a variety of musical genres, but they constitute one unit of scholarly analysis because they all proclaim the same message in a myriad of ways. This message—rejecting the illegitimate authority of the military dictatorship and valorizing the wishes of the common people of Myanmar—echoes the messages of similarly motivated music from around the world, and marks Burmese revolutionary songs as belonging to the long tradition of protest music.

The main aim of this article is to illuminate the function of these revolutionary songs and the intentions of their creators. Along the way, I describe a number of revolutionary songs in detail, explaining why they are meaningful in the context of the post-coup situation in Myanmar. Depending on insights from social movement scholarship, I argue that these songs are best understood as fulfilling the third step of a four-part mobilization process; that is, the songs aim to render listeners willing to actively participate in protest. This differentiates Burmese revolutionary songs from other protest musics around the world, which are usually described by scholars as initiating mobilization by rendering listeners sympathetic to a cause. As the creators and disseminators of Myanmar revolutionary songs explained to me, they created their music

and posted it on social media as a way of fighting back against a lethal regime. Their songs are intended to be a form of motivation and support for the young people who already sympathize with the anti-coup resistance. The audience for revolutionary songs, however, does not always embrace the songs in the spirit in which their creators' intended. Ultimately, this article argues that scholars must be cautious about making liberatory claims for protest music.

## The 2021 Military Coup in Historical Context

Myanmar's existence as a political entity dates back approximately one thousand years, when the leader of an ethnic group that calls itself the *Myanmar lu-myo* established the first Burmese kingdom.<sup>1</sup> Over the centuries, other ethnic groups in the region have had alternately hostile and cooperative relationships with the power center in *Bama-pyi*, as the kingdom was alternatively known.<sup>2</sup> The country that exists today, which has a population of some 52 million and comprises 135 ethnic groups, is a construct that emerged in the wake of British colonization that began during the nineteenth century.<sup>3</sup> The British expelled the last Burmese king in 1886, and from that year until the end of World War II, Burma was part of the British colonial empire. During the twentieth century, Burmese people mounted a series of nationwide protests against the central government, beginning with the colonial government of the 1920s and 1930s. It was during anti-colonial street protests that Burmese people first began chanting, "doh ayay," which means "our affair" (or our concern, or our thing.) This short slogan expressed Burmese people's widely held desire for political self-determination. A young visionary, General Aung San, was a key leader of the independence movement of this era. General Aung San gained wide support because he called for a new polity in which the Myanmar *lu-myo* and the many other ethnic groups would work together and be treated equally. He eventually became the first elected leader of Burma's nascent independent democracy. Tragically, General Aung San was assassinated in 1947 and the federal union he had helped to forge was racked by insurgency; dozens of ethnic minority groups launched their own armies to contest Burmese hegemony.<sup>4</sup> In 1962, when the Tatmadaw (the federal organization of armed forces) took the reins of government in a coup, many Burmese people hoped that this event would stabilize their country. However, the Tatmadaw regime quickly devolved into a dictatorship, led by a junta of generals who enriched themselves at the cost of the common people.<sup>5</sup> By the end of the twentieth century, the country was one of the poorest in the world, and it had one of the worst records of abusing its citizens' human rights.

Burmese people did not passively submit to the military dictatorship.<sup>6</sup> Some, especially those whose businesses were nationalized by the dictatorship, emigrated to other countries. Others did their best to build lives of meaning and raise their children in safety—no small feat in a place where government authority was capricious and frequently cruel. And, episodically, some people participated in large-scale street protests in cities and towns across the country. Protests broke out in July 1962, shortly after the first military coup, on the campus of Rangoon University. The regime violently suppressed the demonstrations, killing a disputed

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<sup>1</sup> Thant Myint-U, *The River of Lost Footsteps* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006), 57.

<sup>2</sup> Victor B. Lieberman, *Burmese Administrative Cycles: Anarchy and Conquest, c. 1580–1760* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400855858>.

<sup>3</sup> Juliane Schober, *Modern Buddhist Conjunctures in Myanmar: Cultural Narratives, Colonial Legacies and Civil Society* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2011), <https://doi.org/10.21313/hawaii/9780824833824.001.0001>.

<sup>4</sup> Martin Smith, *Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity* (Atlantic Heights, NJ: Zed Books, 1991).

<sup>5</sup> Mary P. Callahan, *Making Enemies: War and State Building in Burma* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003).

<sup>6</sup> Christina Fink, *Living Silence in Burma: Surviving Under Military Rule* (Bangkok: White Lotus Press, 2001).

number of protestors. The events of 1962 set a pattern that continued in subsequent protests: first, the protests were initiated by university students and people in their age cohort, and second, in response, the military government (or its agents) killed an unknown number of peaceful protestors. In 1974, protests occurred shortly after the death of U Thant, the first and only Burman to ever serve as Secretary General of the United Nations. The populace, already deeply frustrated after more than a decade of military dictatorship, was angered by the government's unwillingness to grant U Thant a state funeral. The protests of that year were largely led by university students (who actually disinterred U Thant's coffin and reburied it at Rangoon University), and again, an unknown number of protestors were killed by government forces.

In 1988, street demonstrations occurred across Burma, once again initiated by student protests.<sup>7</sup> These events are often referred to as "8888" because coordinated protests were organized on August 8, 1988; estimates vary, but it is likely that thousands of demonstrators were killed by soldiers that month. General Aung San's daughter, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, came to prominence during this time.<sup>8</sup> Having grown up abroad, she returned to Burma—which was officially renamed Myanmar in 1990—and founded a political party called the National League for Democracy (NLD). She became a political prisoner and was held under house arrest for fifteen years. In 2007, months of street protests sparked by a sudden and enormous rise in the price of fuel (which was controlled by the government) again occurred, and again, nonviolent protestors were killed by government forces. The Saffron Revolution, as the 2007 protests were known, differed from those prior because they were the first during which protestors were able to upload the sights and sounds of the protests to the internet, communicating with a watching world.<sup>9</sup>

To the surprise of most observers, and indeed most Burmese people, the military junta embarked on a program of reform during the second decade of the twenty-first century.<sup>10</sup> In 2012, for example, the government lifted most restrictions on media and stopped censoring print publications and music recordings. In 2015, the junta allowed a free and fair federal election; dozens of ethnically identified political parties were able to campaign for votes, and Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's NLD won a large majority of the seats available for contestation. The country's constitution, written by the junta in 2008, reserved twenty-five percent of the seats in the national parliament for serving military officers, and explicitly forbade Daw Aung San Suu Kyi from assuming the title of President. Nevertheless, the election seemed to be a watershed moment that propelled Myanmar into a new, more hopeful, and more economically prosperous democratic future. A second free and fair election in late 2020 saw the NLD capture an even higher percentage of votes cast, and Daw Aung San Suu Kyi—the internationally recognized leader of the country, now holding the title of State Counsellor—was set to lead a series of new initiatives when the parliament reconvened in February 2021. One of those initiatives was to be the writing of a new constitution, which would presumably open all of the seats in parliament to democratic election. In other words, the power of the military junta in national politics would soon be sharply diminished. It is for this reason that members of the military conducted a coup in the early morning hours of February 1, 2021. That day, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and many elected members of parliament were detained, and thousands of political prisoners were arrested and detained in the months following.<sup>11</sup> Anti-coup demonstrations on the streets of all the major cities in

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<sup>7</sup> Pascal Khoo Thwe, *In the Land of Green Ghosts: A Burmese Odyssey* (New York: Harper Collins, 2002).

<sup>8</sup> Peter Popham, *The Lady and the Peacock: The Life of Aung San Suu Kyi* (New York: Experiment, 2012).

<sup>9</sup> For a detailed description of the sounds that permeated the 2007 Saffron Revolution, see Gavin Douglas, *Music in Mainland Southeast Asia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 121–2.

<sup>10</sup> Renaud Egretreau, *Caretaking Democratization: The Military and Political Change in Myanmar* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780190620967.001.0001>.

<sup>11</sup> See the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (Burma) at <https://aappb.org/>.

Myanmar erupted almost immediately, and they continue as of the writing of this article. As in the past, both soldiers and police officers have used live ammunition against street protesters, killing hundreds of people, including both those who are actively protesting and those passing by.<sup>12</sup>

Six months after the coup, in the midst of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the regime was so committed to suppressing the common people that it officially forbade oxygen manufacturers from selling oxygen to private clinics and retail customers—and Tatmadaw soldiers shot at lines of people who lined up to buy now-illegal canisters.<sup>13</sup> On September 7, 2021, the NLD's government-in-exile (the National Unity Government, or NUG) declared war against the regime, encouraging all the citizens of Myanmar to take up arms against "military terrorists."<sup>14</sup> By late 2021, People's Defense Forces (PDFs) were organized around the country; citizens undertook training with the ethnic insurgent armies who had been fighting the Tatmadaw for decades, and then returned to towns and cities to take up arms against "the military" (as it is usually referred to in English). Myanmar's civil disobedience movement (CDM), including widespread work stoppages by civil servants and peaceful street protests, was therefore joined by armed fighters, making the resistance to the military both nonviolent and violent. As we will see below, Myanmar citizens usually do not distinguish between the nonviolent and the armed facets of the opposition; instead, they understand both modes as belonging to one unified movement.

It is in this context, as the most brutal manifestation of the military government reasserted itself, that revolutionary songs emerged into Myanmar's musical and political life. Revolutionary songs are designated as such by their creators and listeners because the songs came to prominence during the time of the Spring Revolution, as the months after the coup came to be known in English. As we will see, some revolutionary songs were composed during the latter months of 2021, while others were composed earlier and became newly important during the Spring Revolution. Revolutionary songs are a vital part of the current protest movement; indeed, some of them are regularly sung during street protests. With that said, I will argue that the scholarly literature on protest music does not quite account for the role that revolutionary songs are playing in contemporary Myanmar. That rich scholarly tradition, as we will see, has not often afforded itself the theoretical resources found in social movement literature, and suffers from a lack of specificity.

## Protest Music in the Scholarly Literature

Much music scholarship has been concerned with the function(s) of protest music, concluding that it serves many different roles in a variety of contexts. As Sumangala Damodaran notes, "In practice, the functions that are served by protest music range from being able to rouse and hold the attention of large gatherings, being part of campaigns, and telling stories of injustice to reproducing music of ordinary people and depicting their lives through lyrics as well as form."<sup>15</sup> One line of investigation in this branch of scholarship debates whether protest music accomplishes social change, and more specifically, whether it can persuade listeners to support a social movement. Interestingly, protest music scholars, often operating within the discipline of music studies, do not often cite the vast social movement literature that has rigorously theorized how it is that people come to join social movements, although this is "perhaps the most studied

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<sup>12</sup> Hannah Beech, "She Just Fell Down. And She Died," *New York Times*, April 4, 2021.

<sup>13</sup> Hannah Beech, "As Covid Rages in Myanmar, Army Hoards Oxygen, Doctors Say," *New York Times*, July 15, 2021.

<sup>14</sup> "Myanmar Shadow Government Calls for Uprising Against Military." *Al Jazeera*, September 7, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/9/7/myanmar-shadow-government-launches-peoples-defensive-war>.

<sup>15</sup> Sumangala Damodaran, "Protest and Music," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*, 2016, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.81>.

process in the social-movement literature.”<sup>16</sup> There are some exceptions.<sup>17</sup> Noriko Manabe, for instance, explains how online protest music mobilized Japanese people to join the anti-nuclear movement. Manabe found that protest songs created and disseminated via the internet (in cyberspace, to use her terminology) in the wake of the Fukushima nuclear power plant disaster actually contributed to the growth of Japan’s anti-nuclear social movement. In 2012, while the Japanese media promoted a pro-nuclear ideology and thereby contributed to a “spiral of silence” around the issue, protest songs spread an anti-nuclear message and helped ordinary Japanese people overcome their reluctance to defy group norms.<sup>18</sup>

Unlike Manabe’s book, however, many other scholarly studies of protest music decline to refer to the social movement literature. A brief review of the key insights from this body of scholarship is thus called for. In 1987, social movement scholars Bert Klandermans and Dirk Oegema outlined a four-step process, called mobilization, which people follow (or drop out of) as they move toward active participation in a social movement.<sup>19</sup> During the decades since that pioneering work, the internet became an important mechanism of mobilization around the world. In 2019, Klandermans joined other scholars in writing about how individuals come to participate in street demonstrations, the tactic most favored by social movements worldwide and an important tactic in Myanmar’s anti-coup resistance.<sup>20</sup> The authors argue that the four-part mobilization process articulated earlier applies to potential participants in contemporary street protests: “(1) people need to sympathize with the cause; (2) people need to know about the upcoming event; (3) people must be willing to participate; and (4) people must be able to participate.”<sup>21</sup>

Within protest music scholarship, writers debate whether protest music “works,” by which they usually mean, whether or not it influences listeners’ thoughts and opinions, or the first part of this four-part model. Because protest music scholars do not rely on the theoretical frames of social movement studies, they do not use their terms. But in general, most studies of the function of protest music focus on whether or not protest songs render listeners sympathetic to a cause—that is, whether they fulfill the first step of the four-step mobilization process outlined above. This persistent debate in the protest music literature questions whether protest music helps to foster positive attitudes toward a given social movement. To say it another way, using the words of Klandermans and Oegema, protest music scholars in this branch of the field investigate whether or not protest music builds mobilization potential.<sup>22</sup>

Protest music scholars who advance the notion that protest music does persuade listeners, rendering them sympathetic to counter-hegemonic causes and open to taking action, rely on various forms of evidence. For example, Thierry Côté offers a grim recounting of the sufferings of several famous popular musicians

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<sup>16</sup> James Jasper, *The Art of Moral Protest: Culture, Biography, and Creativity in Social Movements* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 172, <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226394961.001.0001>.

<sup>17</sup> There are at least two important exceptions to this rule: Ron Eyerman and Andrew Jamison, *Music and Social Movements: Mobilizing Traditions in the Twentieth Century*. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998), <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511628139>. Also see Benjamin Tausig, *Bangkok Is Ringing: Sound, Protest and Constraint* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190847524.001.0001>, although on page 25 Tausig specifically declines to use the term “protest music.”

<sup>18</sup> Noriko Manabe, *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised: Protest Music After Fukushima* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 112 and 148, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199334681.001.0001>.

<sup>19</sup> Bert Klandermans and Dirk Oegema, “Potentials, Networks, Motivations and Barriers: Steps Toward Participation in Social Movements,” *American Sociological Review* 52, no. 4 (1987): 519–31, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2095297>.

<sup>20</sup> Jacqueliën Van Stekelenburg, Bert Klandermans, and Stefaan Walgrave, “Individual Participation in Street Demonstrations,” in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Social Movements*, ed. David A. Snow, Sarah A. Soule, Hanspeter Kriesi, and Holly J. McCammon (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley and Sons, Inc., 2019), 371–91, <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119168577.ch21>.

<sup>21</sup> Van Stekelenburg et. al, “Individual Participation in Street Demonstrations,” 381.

<sup>22</sup> Klandermans and Oegema, “Potentials, Networks, Motivations, Barriers,” 519.

from around the world (such as Victor Jara), noting that governments have harassed, imprisoned, and even killed such musicians because the musicians and their music pose a potent threat to state power.<sup>23</sup> John Haycock asserts that musicians who perform protest music are pedagogues and that protest songs constitute curricula distributed, via mass media, to adult learners.<sup>24</sup> Haycock admitted that “the pedagogical thread . . . is difficult to see,”<sup>25</sup> but it is notable that this assertion has been turned into a kind of policy prescription; thus we read that protest songs should be taught to students of social work, for example.<sup>26</sup> One rigorous empirical study supporting the notion that protest music can be persuasive, and therefore a tool for social change, was published by Jeffrey J. Mondak in 1988. Mondak concluded that “social commentators choosing to use protest music as a tool for dissemination of their messages can successfully persuade listeners if songs include strong arguments, and if environmental forces facilitate [cognitive] processing.”<sup>27</sup> Mark S. Hamm lamented the relative paucity of evidence based on empirical investigations such as Mondak’s but argued that popular music “can elicit sociopolitical action,” although not in the ways that most scholars of protest music usually consider.<sup>28</sup> Hamm pointed to White power heavy metal music, which—as his own structured interviews showed—was a major factor in recruiting young men to the neo-Nazi skinhead movement.<sup>29</sup>

Protest music scholars on the other side of the debate conclude that protest music (understood as recordings in popular music genres, distributed via mass media, or as I will say, protest songs for listening) does not successfully fulfill the first step of the mobilization process. R. Serge Denisoff, for example, surveyed 180 community college students in San Francisco in 1965, asking them to respond to “Eve of Destruction,” an American protest song.<sup>30</sup> The survey convinced Denisoff that “the protest song is primarily seen as an entertainment item rather than one of political significance.”<sup>31</sup> The following year, Denisoff and his colleague Mark H. Levine published further results from the survey, revealing that only fourteen percent of the respondents were able to correctly interpret the theme of the words in “Eve of Destruction.”<sup>32</sup> Deena Weinstein cited this work in her own 2006 publication, in which she pointed out that “protest songs aren’t heard as protest songs,” because listeners sometimes cannot understand the words, and when they can, they often misinterpret them.<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, Weinstein argued, “even when they are understood as intended by their creators, if we address protest songs pragmatically, their impact on political and social change is questionable.”<sup>34</sup> Barbara Lebrun, writing about two different genres of so-called protest music in France,

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<sup>23</sup> Thierry Côté, “Popular Musicians and Their Songs as Threats to National Security: A World Perspective,” *The Journal of Popular Culture* 44, no. 4 (2011), <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-5931.2011.00860.x>.

<sup>24</sup> John Haycock, “Protest Music as Adult Learning and Education for Social Change: A Theorisation of a Public Pedagogy of Protest Music,” *Australian Journal of Adult Learning* 55, no.3 (November 2015): 435.

<sup>25</sup> Haycock, “Protest Music as Adult Learning,” 439.

<sup>26</sup> Lawrence M. Berger, “The Emotional and Intellectual Aspects of Protest Music: Implications for Community Organizing Education,” *Journal of Teaching in Social Work* 20, nos. 1–2 (2000), [https://doi.org/10.1300/J067v20n01\\_05](https://doi.org/10.1300/J067v20n01_05).

<sup>27</sup> Mondak, “Protest Music as Political Persuasion,” *Popular Music & Society* 12, no. 3 (1988): 36, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03007768808591322>.

<sup>28</sup> Mark S. Hamm, “Hammer of the Gods Revisited: Neo-Nazi Skinheads, Domestic Terrorism and the Rise of the New Protest Music,” in *Cultural Criminology*, ed. Jeff Ferrell and Clinton R. Sanders (Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press, 1995), 194.

<sup>29</sup> Hamm, “Hammer of the Gods Revisited,” 205.

<sup>30</sup> R. Serge Denisoff, “Protest Songs: Those on the Top Forty and Those of the Streets,” *American Quarterly* 22, no. 4 (1970): 812, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2711871>.

<sup>31</sup> Denisoff, “Protest Songs,” 822.

<sup>32</sup> R. Serge Denisoff and Mark H. Levine, “The Popular Protest Song: The Case of ‘Eve of Destruction,’” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 35, no. 1 (1971): 120, <https://doi.org/10.1086/267873>.

<sup>33</sup> Deena Weinstein, “Rock Protest Songs: So Many and So Few,” in *The Resisting Muse: Popular Music and Social Protest*, ed. Ian Peddie (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2006), 9–11, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351218061-1>.

<sup>34</sup> Weinstein, “Rock Protest Songs,” 14.

agreed that their impact is questionable.<sup>35</sup> Lebrun explained that these genres contest dominant musical tastes and mainstream political ideas, but queried how deep the musicians' and fans' opposition to French cultural norms actually runs. Kenneth J. Bindas and Craig Houston, two more scholars writing in this vein, disputed the very notion that protest songs even constitute a protest. Arguing against the idea that protest songs are created to express dissent against powerful mainstream ideas or institutions, they pointed out that the US rock music industry began producing anti-Vietnam war songs only in the late 1960s, after public opinion had shifted and became more strongly anti-war.<sup>36</sup>

My review of the protest music literature suggests that scholars investigating case studies around the world usually assert—implicitly or explicitly—that protest music does indeed influence the thoughts and ideas of those who hear it. These writings maintain (usually without providing much evidence) that protest music initiates the four-step mobilization process, sparking sympathy for an oppositional cause. In the examples that follow, it will become clear that, for many scholars, “protest music” is a label that encompasses a very wide range of genres. For example, Valdis Muktupāvels explained that the neo-folklore movement, centered on music and dance, which emerged in Soviet-era Latvia, became an effective counter to the totalitarian government's official folklore performances. Songs presented during neo-folklore gatherings (importantly, these were not called “concerts”) were understood to communicate an anti-Soviet message.<sup>37</sup> During the same era in Soviet Ukraine, rock music was repressed by the state, and therefore those who attended rock concerts “rejected the official Soviet version of their own ethnic identity.”<sup>38</sup> The rock music genre, in this context, became protest music in both the understandings of its fans and of the state police. George Lewis claimed that Hawai'i-based bands consciously rejected the US mainland's stereotyped perspective on their culture. Beginning in the 1970s, Hawai'ian musicians developed a style that opposed mainstream hegemony: by singing in the Hawai'ian language, by playing indigenous instruments, and by critiquing the tourism industry in their lyrics, the musicians encouraged listeners to think similar thoughts.<sup>39</sup> Anastasia Valassopoulos and Dalia Said Mostafa wrote that the lyrics of the popular music disseminated during the 2011 Egyptian revolution articulated new and progressive ideas, in effect fostering change in the minds of listeners: “By articulating sentiments around hope, safety, and community, music can and did pedestrianize these ideas, made them seem *ordinary* and therefore attainable.”<sup>40</sup> Michael Bodden asserted that in 1990s Indonesia, rap music became a locus of protest against the New Order government; young people gravitated to rap specifically because they understood its history as an oppositional genre in the United States.<sup>41</sup>

As we will see below, the creators and disseminators of Myanmar's revolutionary songs do aim to help

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<sup>35</sup> Barbara Lebrun, *Protest Music in France: Production, Identity and Audiences* (New York: Routledge, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315602714>.

<sup>36</sup> Kenneth J. Bindas and Craig Houston, “‘Takin’ Care of Business’: Rock Music, Vietnam and the Protest Myth,” *The Historian* 52, no. 1 (November 1989): 10, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-6563.1989.tb00771.x>.

<sup>37</sup> Valdis Muktupāvels, “The ‘Dangerous’ Folksongs: The Neo-Folklore Movement of Occupied Latvia in the 1980s,” in *Popular Music and Human Rights, vol. 2: World Music*, ed. Ian Peddie (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2011), 86.

<sup>38</sup> Sergei I. Zhuk, “Fascist Music from the West: Anti-Rock Campaigns, Problems of National Identity, and Human Rights in the ‘Closed City’ of Soviet Ukraine, 1975–84,” in *Popular Music and Human Rights, vol. 2: World Music*, ed. Ian Peddie (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2011), 159.

<sup>39</sup> George Lewis, “Style in Revolt Music, Social Protest, and the Hawaiian Cultural Renaissance,” *International Social Science Review* 62, no. 4 (Autumn 1987): 174.

<sup>40</sup> Anastasia Valassopoulos and Dalia Said Mostafa, “Protest Music and the 2011 Egyptian Revolution,” *Popular Music and Society* 37, no. 5 (2014): n.p., <https://doi.org/10.1080/03007766.2014.910905>, emphasis in the original.

<sup>41</sup> Michael Bodden, “Music of the 1990s: ‘Globalization,’ ‘Outlaw Genres,’ and Social Protest,” *Asian Music* 36, no. 2 (Summer–Autumn 2005): 12 and 17, <https://doi.org/10.1353/amu.2005.0015>.

mobilize Burmese citizens to their own country's anti-coup movement. However, as they are well aware, in contemporary Myanmar, there is no broad constituency to convince; the first step of the mobilization process was accomplished conclusively in February 2021, when the military coup occurred.<sup>42</sup> Burmese citizens experienced a “suddenly imposed grievance,” realizing that they had been deprived, overnight, of the opportunity to be governed by the government of their choice.<sup>43</sup> The demand for resistance to this state of affairs arose immediately, mobilizing millions of people from the “bottom up.”<sup>44</sup> Therefore, revolutionary song musicians in Myanmar seek to contribute to the third (not the first) step of the mobilization process—that is, their goal is to make their listeners willing to participate in protest. They hope that by listening to their songs, sympathizers with the cause of democracy in Myanmar will be transformed into participants—that is, that citizens will turn to active participation in street protests, in CDM boycotts, and even in armed resistance. Of course, during interviews with me, none of them used this academic terminology, because social movement theory is not their domain of expertise. But, as I will argue, their understanding of the function of their music is clear: Myanmar revolutionary songs are not intended to persuade listeners to a new way of thinking, but rather to convince already-sympathetic listeners to take action.

### Revolutionary Songs and the Work They Do in Contemporary Myanmar

I was able to interview eight creators of revolutionary songs during the summer and fall of 2021. These song creators—including composers, performers, and producers—come from different backgrounds, and their songs span the range of styles embraced in the revolutionary post-coup repertoire. However—and as I explain further below—they were unified in their understanding of what they were doing as musicians. Three of the eight people I interviewed were Burmese nationals now living abroad, and another three were based in large cities inside Myanmar. The remaining two song creators were fleeing their homes at the time of our interview: one man was in “the jungle” (an expression used by many Burmese people to describe rural areas where ethnic insurgent armies are based), and the second was in Thailand, awaiting a visa to the United States. The stories of these latter two men are worth sharing because they highlight the danger that recording a revolutionary song may pose, and because they reveal the lengths to which committed musicians will go to record such songs.

The first musician, Saw Sithu Htay, is a Pwo Karen Buddhist, age 38, who co-composed a song titled “The Movement Must Go On” (“A Yay Taw Pone Aung Ya Mee”).<sup>45</sup> Saw Sithu Htay declined to name his co-composer, saying that this person must remain anonymous in order to be safe. Saw Sithu Htay himself had fled to “the jungle,” fearing his own arrest. As he explained, the group of musicians who contributed to “The Movement Must Go On” began the recording process at a studio in Hpa-an. While they were in the midst of recording, local police officers and the ward administrator entered the studio and threatened to arrest them. The musicians left immediately; luckily, one of them was able to email an audio file to a studio in Bangkok, where the recording was completed and then uploaded to the internet. The second musician, Ko Nitar, age 42, is a rather well-known professional musician who had, as he said, lived comfortably in Yangon prior to the coup.<sup>46</sup> He described himself as an “activist” who, before the coup, hosted twice-weekly

<sup>42</sup> See Robert Taylor, “Myanmar in 2020: Aung San Suu Kyi Once More Triumphant,” *Southeast Asian Affairs* (2021): 211, <https://doi.org/10.1355/9789814951753-013>.

<sup>43</sup> Van Stekelenburg et. al, “Individual Participation in Street Demonstrations,” 376.

<sup>44</sup> Van Stekelenburg et. al, “Individual Participation in Street Demonstrations,” 381.

<sup>45</sup> Saw Sithu Htay, personal communication, July 16, 2021.

<sup>46</sup> Ko Nitar, personal communication, July 28, 2021.



talk shows on Facebook and gave hundreds of media interviews in which he spoke about his political views. This activity put him on the junta's radar, and in early July 2021, Ko Nitar was charged with three crimes, two of which can merit the death penalty if he were ever convicted. Knowing that he was on the government's official arrest list, Ko Nitar went "to the jungle"; he stated that he slept in eleven different towns and villages before reaching the Thai border, and during this time food and sleep were hard to come by. Also during this time, Ko Nitar recorded the vocal track of "May You Have a Clear Conscience" ("Late Pyar Lone Pay Say"). Because he was on the run, he had to make extraordinary efforts to complete the recording: he had to negotiate with three different "middlemen" to arrange the transport of recording equipment to "the jungle," and had to run a generator to provide the electricity to that equipment. All in all, he said, recording "May You Have a Clear Conscience" was "exhausting and stressful"—but not as emotionally wrenching as his subsequent actions. Because Myanmar's military dictatorship is happy to arrest family members of people on the official arrest list, Ko Nitar became concerned for the safety of his wife and daughter who remained behind in Yangon. Therefore, he and his wife decided to get a divorce and to announce this on Facebook, a decision that shocked their friends and family (Ko Nitar and his wife are Christians). At the time of our interview, Ko Nitar was applying for refugee status in the United States, intending to migrate alone.

Saw Sithu Htay's and Ko Nitar's stories demonstrate that Myanmar's military regime will viciously repress musicians and their music, given the opportunity. In fact, in order to restrict all kinds of speech, and especially contact with foreigners who might be able to funnel help and resources to protesters, the junta curtailed and even shut down the internet inside the country after the coup. It proved impossible, however, to completely disable the internet for any great length of time, and so revolutionary songs, along with many other kinds of anti-coup speech, have continued to circulate. Myanmar's internet grid (with its admittedly shaky connections) not only permitted the dissemination of revolutionary songs; it also enabled research for this article. Using online encrypted applications, I was able to contact musicians inside Myanmar, most of whom asked me—indeed, urged me—to include their birth names, or their artist names, in this article. My interviews with song creators revealed that they have a common perspective on their musical activities, and I argue that this perspective is crucial to understanding the role that revolutionary songs are playing in the post-coup context.

Revolutionary song creators see themselves as fighting on one side of a war, and they believe their songs are a way of advancing the cause for which protesters are fighting. Four of them said explicitly that they made their music because they could not join the armed resistance; these songs, they said, are their way of fighting back against the regime.<sup>47</sup> As Daniel Saw, a songwriter and music producer, told me, many of his friends had recently left Yangon to receive military training from ethnic insurgents "in the jungle."<sup>48</sup> Explaining his decision to record a half-dozen revolutionary songs instead of accompanying his friends, he said, "I had to choose, so I chose soft power." Other interviewees spoke in more general terms, saying that they were "participating in the campaign" against the military coup.<sup>49</sup> Ko Nitar said that "as an artist, I don't know how to fight [militarily]. Making music is how I can best contribute."<sup>50</sup> He explained that the fact that he was under threat of arrest was fairly well-known to his fans; therefore, he hoped that recording a song

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<sup>47</sup> Christopher, personal communication, July 22, 2021; Ko Nitar, personal communication, July 28, 2021; Ko Ko Lwin Htut, personal communication, July 28, 2021; Saw Zaw Naing Oo, personal communication, August 7, 2021.

<sup>48</sup> Daniel Saw, personal communication, September 9, 2021.

<sup>49</sup> For example, Ma Su Pyae, personal communication, July 25, 2021.

<sup>50</sup> Ko Nitar, personal communication July 28, 2021.

under difficult conditions “in the jungle” would be an inspiration for young people especially: “This song would show them that they could also do something difficult to contribute to the revolution.”

All of the song creators I interviewed clearly viewed their songs as direct contributions to the struggle by civilian protesters against Myanmar’s state security forces. The nature of this contribution, as they again explained unanimously, was to provide the emotional stamina needed by protesters to begin, or to continue, protesting—that is, to turn sympathizers with the anti-coup movement into active resisters. In social movement scholarship terms, the musicians sought to render listeners willing to participate, or, to accomplish the third step of the mobilization process. And so these song creators said that their purpose in recording revolutionary songs was to “encourage” and “motivate” listeners, especially those in the young adult cohort who supply the front-line troops of the resistance movement. For example, singer Christopher explained that he could not personally participate in anti-regime demonstrations, given that he lives abroad. Therefore, he said, he recorded and posted songs “to empower the demonstrators, to give them energy, because some have lost relatives in the fight.”<sup>51</sup> For this reason, Christopher said that his post-coup recordings are probably best described not as “revolutionary songs,” but rather as “encouragement songs.”<sup>52</sup> As song creator Ko Ko Lwin Htut put it, “The military oppresses people brutally and even kills protesters. My aim is to fight back against the military. But my band cannot fight with guns. So, in a nutshell, my song aims to stimulate [other] people to fight back against the military coup.”<sup>53</sup> Saw Zaw Naing Oo said that he created his revolutionary song (“Via Spring Revolution”) in April 2021, two months after the coup, after the junta had killed hundreds of protesters and imprisoned thousands of others. “At that time, people were afraid of losing their lives and they didn’t want to continue demonstrating. So I wrote this song to say, ‘Don’t give up. Keep fighting until we get democracy. Don’t be afraid.’ I’m not able to join the military fight. So I want to encourage others through my song. I want to participate [in the resistance] by my music.”<sup>54</sup>

Song creators explained to me that they were confident that their online recordings were successful in encouraging and motivating comrades in the struggle. They pointed to online evidence to support this claim. Saw Sithu Htay, for example, said that the response to his song was clear in the comments that listeners posted online. He noticed two themes in the online comments. First, commenters wrote that they felt emotional when listening to Saw Sithu Htay’s song, and that it caused them to think about youth who had sacrificed their lives for democracy. Second, they wrote that they felt inspired and motivated.<sup>55</sup> For Saw Sithu Htay, these kinds of comments are proof that his song is successfully contributing to the protesters’ cause. Further, once he arrived “in the jungle,” Saw Sithu Htay observed some young people singing the chorus of his song. When he asked them about this, they relayed that they had memorized it after hearing it repeatedly in friends’ online postings and in broadcasts by independent media organizations, including Mizzima and the Democratic Voice of Burma.<sup>56</sup> Like Saw Sithu Htay, other revolutionary song creators carefully tracked the online response to their songs, finding in these responses evidence that their songs were succeeding in mobilizing resistance to “the military.” During interviews with me they repeatedly pointed to metrics like the numbers of views and likes their posted recordings received.<sup>57</sup> For example, Ma Su Pyay,

<sup>51</sup> Christopher, personal communication, July 22, 2021.

<sup>52</sup> One of Christopher’s songs is “Be United” (Nyi Say); see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AXEx-V9cYs4>.

<sup>53</sup> Ko Ko Lwin Htut, personal communication, July 28, 2021.

<sup>54</sup> Saw Zaw Naing Oo, personal communication, August 7, 2021.

<sup>55</sup> Saw Sithu Htay, personal communication, July 16, 2021.

<sup>56</sup> Saw Sithu Htay, personal communication, July 16, 2021.

<sup>57</sup> For example, Ko Ko Lwin Htut, personal communication, July 28, 2021; also Christopher, personal communication, July 22, 2021.

who posted Kaung Htet Kyaw's recording (described below) on YouTube, asserted that "of course" the song achieved its goal of encouraging and motivating listeners; she pointed out that the post received 4,800 views, that commenters all expressed support for the Myanmar resistance movement, and that it had "zero dislikes!"<sup>58</sup> Similarly, Saw Zaw Naing Oo told me that he was happy to see that his song had "over thirty thousand views already"; to him, this was clear evidence that his song was indeed "reaching the young generation."<sup>59</sup>

I was curious about how revolutionary songs are received by their target audience, the young people of Myanmar who have formed the backbone of the street protests and the armed resistance since February 1, 2021. I convened a focus group to investigate. The group, which met via Zoom on October 19, 2021, included eight people (five women and three men), all of whom were Myanmar nationals living inside the country. Their ages ranged from nineteen to thirty-two. I played three online recordings from the corpus of revolutionary songs, and the focus group members graciously shared their comments after listening to each. We started with Daniel Saw's song "United." Asked about the meaning of this song, the focus group members said, "The song is trying to motivate us, especially the protesters and the youth"; and "It says that we are doing the right thing, we're fighting for the truth." The focus group continued by listening to "Tears," recorded by one of Myanmar's most famous pop artists, Phyu Phyu Kyaw Thein. At the time of writing this article, it had more than two hundred thousand views on YouTube, and more than two hundred comments, suggesting that it was one of the better-known revolutionary songs. I included it in my corpus of revolutionary songs because the comments made clear that YouTube listeners understood it as such, although the lyrics to the song are rather abstract. Focus group members agreed, saying that "Tears" "is a motivation song" and that it should be heard as addressing the situation in Myanmar after the 2021 coup. Referring to the phrase in the chorus "the sky with no light," focus group members said that the light was obviously democracy, that the song recites the history of the cruelty of the military regime, and that "it is saying that we must continue with resistance."

It seemed, then, that the mobilizing message of "United" and "Tears" was clearly understood. However, the focus group members did not assert that these songs inspired and motivated them to participate in street protests or in armed revolution. Although these Myanmar young people appreciated the intent of the songs, they were not moved to action by them. In fact, two of the eight focus group members stated that they consciously avoid listening to revolutionary songs on social media because "Whenever I hear a revolutionary song, I can't stop thinking about the current crisis," and "I'm afraid I will cry." Other members pointed out that in the current repressive political climate, listening to revolutionary songs is potentially dangerous. They shared that they feared that the "authorities" were tracking citizens' internet activity, and that any record of listening to such songs would mark them as dissidents.

The focus group reacted most strongly, and most uniformly, to "Illegal Lottery" ("Che"), created and recorded by Daniel Saw. At the time of the focus group, the song had more than ninety-four thousand views on Facebook. None of the focus group members had heard this song before, but all agreed that they would skip it should it appear in their own Facebook feeds. The words of this song name specific individuals—all well-known military regime leaders and supporters—and say that these people are ugly and sexually deviant. The most sympathetic comment about this song was, "I understand that the songwriter wants to show their anger. This is how people react when they are angry. And we also feel the same way, but we don't speak like

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<sup>58</sup> Ma Su Pyay, personal communication, July 25, 2021.

<sup>59</sup> Saw Zaw Naing Oo, personal communication, August 7, 2021.

this, because it is not right.” Other focus group members said that “It’s not funny, it’s totally meaningless”; that “this song is not appropriate”; and that “insulting people is not useful.” Collectively they asserted repeatedly that “this song is *not* motivating.” It was fascinating to compare the focus group members’ reactions to the song to Daniel Saw’s stated hopes for the song. Daniel Saw told me that “Che” is “a mocking song” and “a shaming song.”<sup>60</sup> His goal in creating “Che” was to communicate to listeners that they too could openly mock members of the military junta: “I want listeners to not be afraid. I want them to be able to say, basically, that Min Aung Hlaing [the general at the head of the military government] is foolish.” Daniel Saw was convinced that the song was received in the spirit he intended because Facebook listeners made comments like, “We need more songs like this,” because others made memes of the lyrics and posted them, and because he overheard some young people rapping some of the lyrics from memory.

Daniel Saw and I identified sincere, although utterly divergent, responses to his song. Similarly, within my small focus group, Myanmar young people demonstrated sharply different perspectives on the more general question, “What is the role of revolutionary songs?” One group member insisted that revolutionary songs’ most important contribution is that they are making a historical record of the coup and the subsequent resistance (“a reminder for future generations”), a record that the military government is committed to suppressing. Another agreed with the song creators described above: “These songs give a lot of emotional energy. Because it is possible to forget how many of our people die. People are just surviving now.” The speaker who had the most positive view of such songs said, “Artists and musicians are one of us, one of the people who suffer the same fate. . . . While expressing themselves, some try to motivate us, some to inspire and record these events. As far as I know, none of them get paid for their work. I think it is beautiful that they try to contribute to this revolution in their own way. In my opinion, they play an important role. Personally, sometimes I feel doubtful whether we can win this fight. These songs really help me get motivated and build confidence that we can win.”

The focus group, however, also demonstrated that there is a healthy distrust of the “soft power” of revolutionary songs among the songs’ intended audience. Two of the eight young people in the group were rather dismissive of the notion that such songs had any continuing role to play in the resistance. “Now [meaning, seven months after the coup], nobody listens to these revolutionary songs,” one person said. Another person spoke bluntly in agreement: “These songs used to be very important, at the beginning [of the resistance]. But now we need weapons.”<sup>61</sup>

My focus group research revealed that the reception of protest songs is a complicated phenomenon, even when listeners clearly understand and agree upon the meaning of the words in a given song. The listeners in my focus group had no trouble perceiving the song creators’ intent. They were young people already uniformly supportive of the idea that the military junta should be removed from power, and they knew that the songs were intended to motivate them to protest actively. (If they had been versed in social movement theory, they might have said something like, “These songs are supposed to make us willing to participate in street demonstrations, thereby fulfilling the third step of the four-step mobilization process.”) However, the focus group members declined to be recruited to participate in street protests, or even to repost a shaming, insulting song about junta leaders.

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<sup>60</sup> Daniel Saw, personal communication, September 9, 2021.

<sup>61</sup> For an interesting voice arguing that both peaceful protests and armed resistance are needed, see Han Thit, “We can’t win this fight with armed resistance alone,” *Myanmar Now*, January 21, 2022, <https://www.myanmar-now.org/en/news/we-cant-win-this-fight-with-armed-resistance-alone>.

It is with this caveat in mind that I proceed to my analysis of a number of Myanmar's revolutionary songs. I offer this analysis as an outsider scholar, acknowledging that my limited perspective is one among many. Regrettably, space does not allow for descriptions of all of the songs in the genre. I will not devote any of my discussion to revolutionary songs in foreign languages, for example, although examples in English and German exist and are no doubt worthy of analysis. In addition, social media users have been commenting on Burmese-language songs recorded and uploaded before the 2021 coup, and their comments reveal that they are effectively "re-hearing" these songs as speaking to the present moment. These songs usually focus on the person who embodies the hopes of anti-coup protesters, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, and her father, General Aung San. To give just one example: on February 18, 2021, a poster named Wild Digi Ani uploaded a medley of twelve songs, titling the compilation "Songs We Should Be Listening to Now." The medley begins with three of the best-known revolutionary songs (discussed below); the fourth song is a tribute to Aung San Suu Kyi, and the seventh is a tribute to Aung San. The other songs in the medley similarly pre-date the 2021 military coup but have gained a new meaning for Myanmar listeners in its wake. The tenth song is titled "Yon Kyi Ya" or "A Thing You Believe In." As one Burmese interlocutor explained to me about "Yon Kyi Ya": "It was not very much related with these current political movements at first. However, it [is] now truly relatable for those people [who] are striking for democracy, as the song is, in general, encouraging the listeners not to give up and to walk until the end of the life journey."<sup>62</sup> To the poster Wild Digi Ani—and, we can assume, to some proportion of the half-million viewers who watched the compilation—all twelve songs in the medley are "songs we should be listening to now," because they address the post-coup situation, regardless of when they were originally written. This kind of "re-hearing" of older songs as current protest songs is another phenomenon worthy of scholarly analysis, and is unfortunately outside of the scope of this article. The balance of my article is dedicated to a small but representative sample of revolutionary songs, specifically, songs that were actively performed during anti-coup protests, and/or that were recorded after February 1, 2021.

## Revolutionary Songs In Situ

One of the most thoughtful recent contributions to the literature on protest music—and one that shaped my own thoughts as I researched revolutionary music in Myanmar—is a 2015 article by Rachel Vandagriff. Vandagriff argued that scholars of protest music, attracted to its emancipatory potential, have often neglected to analyze it carefully. Calling for "a stricter and more discerning evaluation of protest music," she delineated two categories (with three subcategories) into which we ought to sort such songs: protest songs in situ, and, other protest songs—which are either songs about protest, songs expressing protest, or songs embodying protest.<sup>63</sup> Protest songs in situ are those sung by protesters while engaged in the act of protesting. Vandagriff's "other protest songs" are recordings intended primarily for listening, and therefore I will term them protest songs for listening.<sup>64</sup> Below, I respond to Vandagriff's call by using her two-part framework to analyze the revolutionary songs created following the 2021 military coup in

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<sup>62</sup> Sa Phyo Arkar, personal communication, May 11, 2021.

<sup>63</sup> Rachel S. Vandagriff, "Talking about a Revolution: Protest Music and Popular Culture, from Selma, Alabama, to Ferguson, Missouri," *Lied und populäre Kultur / Song and Popular Culture* 60/61 (2015/2016): 337.

<sup>64</sup> In 1970, R. Serge Denisoff delineated the two different categories of protest songs that Vandagriff outlines, although he named them differently [see Denisoff, "Protest Songs," 821]. Vandagriff is correct, however, in pointing out that this basic distinction was neglected by most protest music scholars during subsequent decades.

Myanmar. As will become apparent, her categories are helpful. However, the corpus under analysis here problematizes the idea that a given protest song fits neatly into one category or the other.

Vandagriff explains that protest songs in situ are “music that is defined by the active role that singers and their songs play in protest.”<sup>65</sup> These are the songs that protesters actually sing while they march, display signs, and chant other slogans. As Vandagriff points out, protest songs in situ are the minority of songs belonging to the larger category of protest music.<sup>66</sup> Such songs must be relatively short and simple, so that they can be easily learned and performed by people who attend a protest (most of whom are not music specialists). The corpus of Myanmar revolutionary music includes a handful of songs sung in situ, and I obtained footage and firsthand reports of five songs being sung by protesters while engaged in protesting.

The song that seems to be sung the most often, and is the best known, is titled, “Until the End of the World” (“Kabar Ma Kyay Bu” in Burmese). This song has become known as the anthem of the anti-coup movement. Multiple versions of it exist on YouTube, including a Korean-language translation and a Spanish and English language translation. “Until the End of the World” was composed (by a man named Naing Myanmar) and first recorded to protest the actions of the Myanmar government in 1988.<sup>67</sup> Newly relevant in 2021, “Until the End of the World” is a copy thachin—that is, a Burmese-language song that uses the melody and harmonies of a foreign-language (usually English-language) hit song.<sup>68</sup> In this case, the song that was copied was “Dust in the Wind,” which was released by the American band Kansas in 1977. The three verses of “Until the End of the World” evoke the memory of “martyrs” of Burmese history who resisted British colonialism and exhort listeners to follow in their steps: “Do not waver / Just like our fallen heroes, who fought the battle of democracy / Let us stand strong and resist.” The song also references another trope that appears in many of the revolutionary songs: the shedding of blood. “Until the End of the World” proclaims that “our history is written in blood.” It laments that “civilians’ corpses are lying on the road” and, later, that “the blood that flowed on the road has not dried up.” As this and other Burmese revolutionary songs unflinchingly maintain, political protest in Myanmar is a life-and-death endeavor.

The first verse of “Until the End of the World” includes words that were effectively banned during the junta’s first long reign: “revolution” and “democracy.” Similarly, the second verse references the names of two historical figures, Ko Taw Hmaing and Thakin Aung San. Thakin (or General) Aung San was the father of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, and after 1988, his image was removed from the nation’s public life; most notably, currency that showed his face was removed from circulation.<sup>69</sup> It is hard to overstate how sensitive the preceding words were (and are becoming again) in junta-controlled Myanmar. I have been conducting fieldwork there since 2007, and I vividly recall several instances before 2012 when interlocutors became deeply uncomfortable, and even reproved me, for referring to the country as “Burma” (instead of

<sup>65</sup> Vandagriff, “Talking about a Revolution,” 335.

<sup>66</sup> Vandagriff, “Talking about a Revolution,” 336.

<sup>67</sup> Phoe Wa, “Interview with the creator of Kabar Ma Kyay Bu,” *Myanmar Times*, February 10, 2021,

<https://www.mmtimes.com/news/interview-creator-kabar-ma-kyay-bu.html>.

Reinforcing statements made by my own interviewees, Naing Myanmar told a *Myanmar Times* reporter that he believed his song would motivate protesters: “This song will keep people fighting for justice, when everything is so unfair.” During the same interview, as the reporter noted, a friend who was attending the interview warned Naing Myanmar that he could be arrested for making such statements.

<sup>68</sup> Heather MacLachlan, *Burma’s Pop Music Industry: Creators, Distributors, Censors* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2011), 51. See also Jane Ferguson, “Burmese Super Trouper: How Burmese Poets and Musicians Turn Global Popular Music into *Copy Thachin*,” *The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology* 14, no. 3 (2013), <https://doi.org/10.1080/14442213.2013.787449>.

<sup>69</sup> San Yamin Aung, “Gen Aung San to Return to Banknotes Despite Military Disapproval,” *The Irrawaddy*, November 17, 2017, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/gen-aung-san-return-banknotes-despite-military-disapproval.html>.

“Myanmar,” the name used by the military regime). Citizens faced arrest and long prison sentences for publicly articulating pro-democracy sentiments, and even for privately displaying the image of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi in their homes. It is for this reason that a well-regarded book about the lives of common people in Burma during this time was titled *Living Silence*.<sup>70</sup> When protesters sing “Until the End of the World” during a street protest, pronouncing words like “democracy” and the name of Aung San Suu Kyi’s father, they not only reinforce the message of the song but also audibly defy the authority of the ruling junta. By singing this song in situ, they are speaking the unspeakable—or rather, singing the unsingable.

Another song sung in situ at 2021 protests is “Very Important” (“A Ye Kyi Bi” in Burmese); this song too was originally created in the wake of the 1988 protests.<sup>71</sup> It is a march-like tune. The original recording features snare drums pounding out a steady beat, and the melody begins by outlining the descending major triad. The words assert that, “Brothers, it is a very important time / We must unite and march together / to write a new history, in our blood / We will keep our blood oath / We will give our lives for our country / We will march onward marked by the peacock’s blood.” This song, even more directly than “Until the End of the World,” acknowledges that democracy protestors may have to—indeed will have to—shed their own blood to usher in a democratic government. The reference to the singers’ blood oath is paired with the mention of the peacock’s blood. The icon of the National League for Democracy (NLD), the political party headed by Aung San Suu Kyi, is a fighting peacock. This particular symbol was adopted by other democratic political parties during the months leading to the 2015 election, and its use dates back to the 1930s, when it was deployed by the All Burma Students Union, which fought against British colonial control during the 1930s.<sup>72</sup> To sing about a peacock, in the 2021 Myanmar context, is to explicitly evoke anti-dictatorial protest and the contemporary pro-democracy movement. (Indeed, one of my translators translated the last line of the lyrics quoted above as “We have peacock (NLD) blood.”)

“Reject” (“A Lo Ma Shi”) is a third song sung in situ during Myanmar street protests. To my knowledge, this song was composed early in 2021. The first section of the song features words about fighting together for freedom and democracy, but it is the chorus that is especially memorable because of the repeated words of the song’s title: “Let’s kick out the dictators / Reject, reject [alternately, unwanted, unwanted] / Citizens, protest against the dictators / Reject, reject / Let’s bang our pots and pans together.” This chorus is repeated numerous times. The exhortation to bang pots and pans refers to a form of protest that became common across Myanmar after the coup; citizens in large apartment buildings and in small bamboo houses alike engaged in this action nightly for some weeks. This kind of protest is not unique to Myanmar,<sup>73</sup> but in Myanmar it is uniquely meaningful, because the banging of pots and pans is something that Theravada Buddhists do during New Year celebrations in April, to drive away evil spirits from their homes. Therefore, engaging in the same action as part of a pro-democracy protest is a way for protestors to indicate that they equate the military junta with evil spirits or demons that must be exorcised from the nation.

The fourth song of which I have evidence of being sung during street protests is often titled “Revolution” (“Nway Oo Taw Lone Yay” in Burmese). This is a relatively slow-paced tune set entirely in the minor mode. Like the other songs in situ discussed here, “Revolution” is easy to learn and perform

<sup>70</sup> Christina Fink, *Living Silence: Burma Under Military Rule* (Bangkok, Thailand: White Lotus Press, 2001).

<sup>71</sup> Mon Mon Myat, “Do You Hear the People Sing? A Guide to Myanmar Protest Music.” *Khaosod English*, March 1, 2021, <https://www.khaosodenglish.com/opinion/2021/03/01/do-you-hear-the-people-sing-a-guide-to-myanmar-protest-music/>.

<sup>72</sup> Phyo Thiha Cho, “A Star and a Peacock—Which Party is That? Election Symbols Set to Confuse,” *The Irrawaddy*, September 28, 2015, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/election/feature/a-star-and-a-peacock-which-party-is-that-election-symbols-set-to-confuse>.

<sup>73</sup> Iaria Favretto, “Rough Music and Factory Protest in Post-1945 Italy,” *Past and Present* 228, no. 1 (August 2015): 213, <https://doi.org/10.1093/pastj/gtv025>.

because the melody is contained within an octave, it consists of only four phrases, and the first and second phrases are identical. The complete words of “Revolution” are: “Our flesh and blood serve to defeat the dictator / Fear cannot stop us; all citizens are ready to fight [alternately, ready for the revolution] / Greedy for power, they threaten the people / We must all be brave and fight back; the dictatorship must end.” Once again, this song acknowledges at the outset that to contest the military government is deeply dangerous; indeed, it may cost one’s life. Nevertheless, the song asserts, such sacrifice is necessary and will ultimately result in victory.

The fifth and final song that (as far as I was able to determine) is sung during anti-coup protests is a song believed to be beloved by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi; it is sung for precisely that reason, in solidarity with her. It is titled “Be Strong, Young Girl,” and as one can tell from the chorus, the song can easily be understood to be addressing Aung San Suu Kyi herself: “Do not give up, young girl / Only the brave can overcome / When working for the sake of others, you really must sacrifice your own [fate].” Once again, in this song we hear the emphasis on self-sacrifice, which seems to be common to Burmese revolutionary songs. The song also metaphorically references the danger one faces in contesting forces that prevent people from being “successful and free”: “Tidal waves are rising steadily, causing the surface of the sea to become unsteady.” Ultimately, the song reinforces Buddhist teaching, articulating values common to the large majority of Burmese people: “The road of Samsara is not smooth. . . . Even if there are many more dangerous swords deterring you, don’t forget that wisdom is power / Mindfulness is the messenger.”

The five songs described above are sung *in situ*, and sometimes performed on musical instruments *in situ*.<sup>74</sup> However, many versions of each of these songs also exist on YouTube and other social media sites, uploaded so that listeners around the world can appreciate them. This simple fact immediately complicates Vandagriff’s tidy categories; it is clear in the case of Burmese revolutionary songs that protest songs *in situ* may also—indeed do also—belong to the category of protest songs for listening. The story of one of the song creators I interviewed, Kaung Htet Kyaw, demonstrates how the circulation of music on the internet effectively blurs the boundaries of both of Vandagriff’s categories. Kaung Htet Kyaw created a solo piano version of “Until the End of the World.” As a twenty-two-year-old, he had never heard the song sung *in situ*, but rather learned it by listening repeatedly to other recordings of it on the internet.<sup>75</sup> After a friend uploaded his piano-only version to YouTube, Kaung Htet Kyaw was contacted by “random protesters” on Facebook, who requested his permission to broadcast his recording during their upcoming street protests. He gave his permission gladly (“It’s a must!”). In this example, we see that one of the best-known revolutionary songs (which was originally sung *in situ* during the 1988 protests) was, for one young musician, first a song for listening and later a song—specifically, an instrumental recording—used *in situ*.

## Revolutionary Recordings: Protest Songs for Listening

Vandagriff’s second category of protest songs includes many more songs than the first category.<sup>76</sup> Protest songs for listening, as I call them, are recordings made in studios and circulated via mass media; their creators’ intent is that people will listen to these recordings at times when they are not actively engaged in protesting. Vandagriff divides protest songs for listening into three subcategories: songs about protest, songs

<sup>74</sup> See discography for a recording of the song “Revolution” being performed by a large group of string and wind instrument players during a protest.

<sup>75</sup> Kaung Htet Kyaw, personal communication, July 25, 2021.

<sup>76</sup> Vandagriff, “Talking about a Revolution,” 336.



that express protest, and songs that embody protest. Once again, as we will see below, this delineation is helpful and yet somewhat inadequate to the task of capturing the complexity of Burmese revolutionary songs in the era of social media.

### Songs about protest

A song in Vandagriff's first subcategory, songs about protest, "describes a protest in very general terms."<sup>77</sup> The Myanmar revolutionary song that is the best exemplar of this category is "Tha Ma Ya Taw Bu" or "I Can't Make It, Mom," recorded and posted to YouTube by David Lai. This song describes a particularly tragic incident that was well-publicized after it occurred on February 20, 2021. A sixteen-year-old boy was fatally shot while protesting in Mandalay. As he lay dying in his mother's arms, he said, "I can't make it." As the song laments on behalf of the bereaved mother, "Let her cry and let her tears fall for a martyr in this land." In telling this story, the song effectively describes an anti-coup protest, highlighting the terrible price paid by some protesters and their families.

Vandagriff, like most scholars of protest music, focuses on the words of songs in order to structure her analysis. However, Burmese listeners to revolutionary songs almost inevitably listen to these songs via social media, encountering them on Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok (among other platforms). In most cases, the sound of the music is paired with a video; for most revolutionary songs, the video includes graphics of the song lyrics and still photographs of 2021 street protests. If we take into account the visual images that are part of most revolutionary songs, it is immediately obvious that most of these songs describe protest. For example, the video accompanying a rap song titled "Doh Ayay" (referencing the century-old protest slogan) contains footage from a number of street protests, including short interpolations of the rappers themselves performing during a protest. The video's subtitles—in Korean, Japanese, and English—reveal that the chorus of this song combines the Myanmar-specific chant with well-worn phrases used in protests around the world: "Doh ayay, down with the dictatorship / Doh ayay, to win democracy back / Doh ayay, power to the people / Our blood, our sweat, we will raise our voices." As the chorus demonstrates, this song's lyrics are not particularly descriptive of the 2021 anti-coup protests in Myanmar. The visuals in the video, however, portray the protests—and the repression of protesters by security forces—in vivid detail. "Doh ayay"—like many other revolutionary songs—should be understood as describing protest by way of its accompanying video, although its lyrics may not immediately place it in this subcategory.

### Songs that express protest

Within the larger category of protest songs for listening, the second subcategory is songs that express protest. According to Vandagriff, such songs have "a direct mode of address."<sup>78</sup> Their lyrics recite "much of what . . . is objectionable" and "articulate a clear call for protest."<sup>79</sup> Ultimately, Vandagriff explains, songs that express protest call on listeners to do something—or not do something—to register their opposition to the current situation.

One Myanmar revolutionary song that fits into this subcategory is "Thway Ma Aye Kyay" or "Don't Let Your Blood Cool Down." The song begins with the exhortation in the title, which is in direct contrast

<sup>77</sup> Vandagriff, "Talking about a Revolution," 339.

<sup>78</sup> Vandagriff, "Talking about a Revolution," 339.

<sup>79</sup> Vandagriff, "Talking about a Revolution," 341.

to the usual priority Burmese people place on keeping themselves cool. Myanmar has a hot and humid climate, where people are frequently sweating and uncomfortable, and therefore coolness—of body and of mind—is much desired. The song goes on to call listeners to join the fight, reminding them of the deeply objectionable actions of the military regime: “Let the people be united in this revolution / Many innocents are behind bars / Don’t let your blood cool off / Give democracy back to the people.”

Myanmar revolutionary songs that express protest go beyond addressing potential protesters, however. Many songs in this subcategory have lines, and even sections, in which the song narrator speaks directly to the enemy, that is, to “the military” as it is so often glossed. “Don’t Let Your Blood Cool Down” exemplifies this tendency. Beginning at 2:13, the words of the song label the leaders of the dictatorship as “dogs,” which is a profound insult in Myanmar (where dogs are usually feral animals, feared and hated by homeowners). Speaking to these “dogs,” the song goes on to say, “You are pointing guns at people, asking if they dare to die / We will sweat and bleed during this Spring Revolution. . . . You guys use guns to blow people’s brains out. . . . You are embarrassing your leader.”<sup>80</sup> In fact, many of the Burmese songs that express protest switch quickly between addressing listeners on both sides of the conflict, demanding the attention of both protesters and regime leaders. In the rap song “Revolution” by Floke Rose, for example, the lead vocalist begins by aiming his words directly at the dictatorship: “You stage coups, you show your guns / You are oppressors with zero respect for human rights / I demand you amend the 2008 constitution which enslaves us.” Without missing a beat, he turns directly to citizens: “People, stage protests everywhere / Leave the house and take to the streets . . . Oppose all despots / It’s the only way we can clean up this mess.” Another revolutionary song that switches back and forth between addressing the regime and addressing protesters at high speed is “The Night Will Not Be Silenced,” which was recorded by four Yangon-based punk bands and mixed and mastered by a producer in the United Kingdom.<sup>81</sup> In one representative continuous section, this song addresses Myanmar’s security forces (“Pull your head out of the sand / can you hear the pots and pans? / There is blood on your hands / Can you hear the pots and pans?”), then addresses the very protesters who bang the pots and pans (“Drive out the evil / This is the sound of anger and dissent / Make them understand how freedom tasted and what it meant”), and then resumes addressing the hated military (“You’ll never break the people / You’ll never break the millions strong”).

Revolutionary songs such as these demonstrate that Vandagriff’s category of songs that express protest must be understood expansively. Songs that express protest certainly do speak to citizens, summoning them to protest. But they may—and do, in the case of Myanmar’s revolutionary songs—also use their “direct mode of address”<sup>82</sup> to vilify those who are the target of the protests, and even call on them to act—by amending the constitution, for example.

### **Songs that embody protest**

Vandagriff’s third and final subcategory (of the larger category of protest songs for listening) is “songs that embody protest.”<sup>83</sup> Reminding us again that such songs are not intended to be sung in situ, and in fact

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<sup>80</sup> The complete lyric is: “You are embarrassing your leader with Mom’s high heels.” This is an example of the homophobia that crops up in some revolutionary songs. Song lyrics sometimes vilify the military regime, including specific individual male leaders, by saying that they are contemptible not only because they violate Burmese citizens’ human rights, but also because they are effeminate.

<sup>81</sup> “Check Out New Hardcore Punk Song to Support Myanmar,” *Unite Asia: Punk/Harcore/Metal News from around Asia*, March 26, 2021, <https://uniteasia.org/check-new-hardcore-punk-song-support-myanmar/>.

<sup>82</sup> Vandagriff, “Talking about a Revolution,” 339.

<sup>83</sup> Vandagriff, “Talking about a Revolution,” 343.

are not usually particularly singable, she explains that songs embodying protest are recordings that include audio taken from news coverage. “The audio footage makes these songs extremely topical and grounds these songs in real life—the sounds you hear are sounds that took place in the event about which the singer sings.”<sup>84</sup>

As explained above, in reference to songs that describe protest, many of Myanmar’s revolutionary recordings are created expressly to be circulated on social media sites like YouTube and Facebook, and therefore, they are music videos. These music videos include many still photographs, video clips, and audio clips of 2021 street protests. In fact, the large majority of the songs that are intended for listening include such elements. In this sense, most Burmese revolutionary songs are songs that not only describe protest, but also embody it. In what follows, I analyze just two songs with interpolations of sounds of street protests. In each of these cases, the shift to the sound of the live street protest is rather dramatic, creating a contrast with the rest of the recording. These two recordings therefore fulfill the strictest understanding of Vandagriff’s categorization.

The first example of a song that embodies protest is titled “Mother, May You Be Healthy”; it was composed by Min Si Thu and is sung by Min Si Thu and Mi Phoo. The lyrics are a direct appeal to “Mother,” whom listeners will understand to be Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. (To avoid any possibility that this metaphor could be misunderstood, the first eighteen seconds of the YouTube video show the NLD leader’s face). The singers plead, “Mother, the truth is more bitter than we thought / Gather strength, so we can keep our heads up.” Like so many other revolutionary songs, this one references protesters’ willingness to resist the military regime by shedding their own blood; the phrase that occurs most repeatedly is: “The Mother we love with brave red blood / May you be healthy mentally and physically.” At the 1:35 mark of “Mother, May You Be Healthy,” the composer has interpolated what seems to be the calls of a leader of a protest march. Because the sound of the live protest is so faint in the mix, it proved impossible for my Burmese interlocutors to discern all the words, but they did hear the name “Thakin Aung San” (“Leader Aung San”) being shouted. General Aung San’s name is often evoked during anti-coup protest marches, and it is unsurprising to encounter it in a song that embodies protest.

The second example is a medley of elements. It begins with an excerpt from “Doh Ayay,” a revolutionary recording mentioned above, as an example of a song that describes protest. The aural elements of “Doh Ayay” were recorded in a studio and that recording was combined with many short video clips to make a YouTube-ready product. In this medley, the sound quality abruptly shifts at 0:50, and it is clear that we are now viewing and hearing raw footage from an anti-coup protest. At this point, the video shows a group of women protesters performing a choreographed dance to a recording of “Very Important” (“A Ye Kyi Bi,” one of the best-known revolutionary songs sung in situ). These few seconds of live footage contrast powerfully with the professionally mixed rap video that follows. The interpolation of the amateur (likely cellphone) recording of a street protest between two typical revolutionary song recordings does—to my ear at least—have the effect described by Vandagriff, grounding the medley video in real-life events and making the YouTube poster’s presentation more immediately topical.

## Conclusion

By the time I concluded the writing of this article, in early 2022, anti-coup street protests in Myanmar

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<sup>84</sup> Vandagriff, “Talking about a Revolution,” 344.

were becoming very short in duration, sometimes lasting less than one minute. Protesters had to disperse very quickly to evade brutal treatment, and possible arrest, at the hands of government forces. For this reason, it became less common for protesters to sing revolutionary songs in situ. Song creators continued to create new revolutionary songs for listening, however, and even songs recorded by artists in hiding were successfully uploaded to and widely appreciated on the internet.<sup>85</sup> Myanmar revolutionary songs contribute to the scholar-delineated genre of protest music, but as this article has argued, they did not fit neatly into categories outlined by scholars, nor did they function in the same way that most protest music has been assumed to function. Specifically, revolutionary songs did not serve to persuade indecisive Myanmar citizens that the military coup of February 1, 2021, was illegitimate and destructive. Rather, their creators intended them to encourage and further motivate the millions of people who already supported the resistance movement, moving them to active participation in protesting. As my small focus group showed, Myanmar listeners understood the message and intent of revolutionary songs; however, they were not always willing to listen to such songs, nor were they willing to obey the songs' exhortations. In addition, some openly discounted the possibility that the music could foster political change, believing that armed resistance is more useful than "soft power."

This study is necessarily a snapshot in time of a complex and evolving social and musical phenomenon. Further, it was constrained by the reality that after the military coup, Myanmar's borders were closed to international visitors, making on-the-ground investigation impossible, and by restrictions on internet access. Nonetheless, I was surprised and humbled by how many Myanmar citizens (musicians and listeners) corresponded with me via the internet, granted me interviews via encrypted applications, and encouraged me to use their birth names or "artist names" in my writing. I am grateful that, with their help, I was able to conduct research that performs an important documentary function. This article records how some courageous Burmese people responded to the immense crimes committed against them and against their country.

Despite the limitations inherent to researching protest music in conditions of extreme government repression, Myanmar revolutionary songs deserve the attention of scholars of protest music. These songs—and more specifically, the perspectives of their creators and their listeners—call those of us in the academy to be cautious in our claims about protest music. Listening carefully to interlocutors who create and receive protest songs may reveal that scholarly questions and claims about the music are misplaced or inadequate. Although the words of protest songs imply tremendous liberatory potential, that potential may not be realized on the ground. I hope that Myanmar musicians' and audiences' nuanced discussions of music in the post-coup context, and my analysis of the same, go some way toward furthering the scholarly understanding of the potentiality and actuality of protest music.

### **Discography (listed in order of mention in article)**

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<sup>85</sup> "'This Must Be The Last:' New Anti-Regime Song From Myanmar's Revolutionary Rockers," *The Irrawaddy*, December 10, 2021, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/this-must-be-the-last-new-anti-regime-song-from-myanmars-revolutionary-rockers.html>.

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Phyu Phyu Kyaw Thein. “Myat Yay” (Tears). Composed by KWT1. Uploaded March 23, 2021. YouTube  
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Songs We Should Be Listening to Now (medley), posted by Wild Digi Ani

1. “A Lo Ma Shi” (Reject);
2. “A Yay Kyi Bi” (Very Important), composed by Htoo Eain Thin, performed by Moon Aung;
3. “Revolution”;
4. “Than Ma Hni Late Pyar” (Iron Butterfly), composed and performed by Lynn Lynn;
5. “Myaw Lint Chat Ta Sone Ta Yar” (A Piece of Hope), composed by Saung Oo Hlaing,  
performed by Ni Ni Khin Zaw;
6. “Than bone” (Iron Bucket), composed by Yu Zaw and Nano Peace Phyo Myat Aung (Agni),  
performed by Khup Pi and Nano Peace Phyo Myat Aung (Agni);
7. “Lu Pae A Tu Pae” (Our General), composed and performed by Khup Pi;
8. “Take a Look (Nhae)”;
9. “Blue Saing Ne` Pu Zaw Chin” (Offering with Devil’s Music), composed and performed by  
Lynn Lynn;
10. “Yone Kyi Yar” (In Trust), composed by Thoon Pu, performed by Lay Phyu;
11. “Sit” (War), composed by The Scare, performed by Phyu Phyu Kyaw Thein;
12. “Yong Nee” (Ray), composed and performed by Lynn Lynn.

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